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UZBEKISTAN: Crackdown continues against Muslims and Christians

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Muslims and Christians are both falling foul of Uzbekistan's crackdown on religious freedom, Forum 18 News Service has found. In the capital Tashkent and the surrounding area, the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan thinks that there has this year been a sharp increase in the number of arrests and detentions of devout Muslims. Many of those detained have been accused of "Wahhabism," a term often erroneously applied in Central Asia to pious Muslims. The state Religious Affairs Committee has refused to discuss the arrests with Forum 18. Christians also continue to be victimised by the authorities, the latest publicly known incident being a Protestant Pastor being fined and Christian material confiscated from him being ordered to be destroyed – this is normal practice in Uzbekistan. The material included New Testaments which had been legally printed and paid for. Religious censorship against all faiths has recently been tightened, Forum 18 has found.

The number of arrests and detentions for people's religious convictions has risen sharply in the Uzbek capital Tashkent and the surrounding Tashkent region, Surat Ikramov, Chairman of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan, told Forum 18 News Service from Tashkent on 19 July. During the first half of July alone, Ikramov said he has received more than 30 appeals for help from local Muslims. Overall he thinks that, since the beginning of 2006 around 150 Muslims have been arrested and sentenced for their religious beliefs.

Many of those detained have been accused of "Wahhabism," which is technically the brand of purist Islam followed in Saudi Arabia but widely – and largely erroneously – applied in Central Asia to describe pious Muslims.

The deputy head of the government's Religious Affairs Committee, Artybek Yusupov, refused to discuss the latest wave of harassment of religious believers. "We are not going to make any comment over the telephone. If you want to know our point of view, come to Uzbekistan," he told Forum 18 from Tashkent on 19 July.

Forum 18's correspondent has been detained and deported from Uzbekistan (see F18News 16 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=631). Uzbek police soon afterwards told a Protestant pastor that "we are not going to let foreign human rights activists into Uzbekistan any more. It's payback time – we've already dealt with Igor Rotar and now we've come for you" (see F18News 3 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=665).

Among the recent cases Ikramov of the Human Rights Initiative Group of Uzbekistan cited was a 23 June house search. Some 20 police officers searched in a house in the Choshtepa mahalla (city district) of Tashkent's Yunusabad district. They confiscated a copy of the Koran, the hadiths (sayings attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammad), religious books and tape recordings of the exiled mullah Obid kori Nazarov (who was forced to flee the country after the authorities branded him a "Wahhabi" leader) and his pupil Hairullah Hamidov. The items were seized as material evidence and 19-year-old Farhod Muminov and his friend Akmal were arrested and accused of "Wahhabism".

The authorities have in the past targeted those they think to be followers of popular Muslim theologian Obidhon qori Nazarov (see F18News 12 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=758).

In a separate recent case, police officers carried out a search in a house in the town of Chinaz in Tashkent region. There they seized the Koran, the hadiths and two books in Arabic. After the search they arrested Abduvohid Mirzaev, who had previously been convicted for his religious beliefs.

According to Ikramov, law enforcement officers always follow exactly the same procedure: between six and 30 people accompanied by two or three masked men armed with automatic rifles carry out a search – usually unauthorised – of a believer's home and then take him to the police station. Those arrested are generally found guilty under the following Criminal Code articles: Article 159 (undermining Uzbekistan's constitutional basis), Article 244-1 (manufacture or distribution of documents that pose a threat to public safety and public order) and Article 244-2 (setting up, leading or participating in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organisations).

However, Ikramov maintains that most of those arrested have no political connections, and their only "crime" is that of performing their daily prayers and learning about Islam.

Muslims are not the only current targets of the state. In the north-western autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan [Qoraqalpoghiston], all non-Orthodox and non state-controlled Muslim activity is forbidden. Earlier this month, one Protestant was jailed for seven days and two others were given extremely large fines, solely for running an unregistered church (see F18News 17 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=814).

On 4 July, Judge Mehribon Hasanov, in the Criminal Court in Urgench [Urganch] in north-western Uzbekistan, fined local Protestant pastor Sergei Lunkin 47,000 Uzbek Soms (243 Norwegian Kroner, 31 Euros, or 39 US Dollars). The estimated 2005 average monthly salary was around 60 US Dollars. He was sentenced for breaking Article 240 (breaking the law on religious organisations) and Article 241 (failing to follow the proper procedures for giving religious instruction) of the Code of Administrative Offences, a Tashkent Protestant who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 on 18 July. Hasanov also ordered the destruction of Christian material confiscated from Pastor Lunkin, consisting of 425 books, 60 CDs and 29 videotapes and audiotapes. The material included 32 copies of the New Testament, which had been legally printed by and purchased from the Bible Society of Uzbekistan.

Confiscated religious literature, including the Bible, is frequently burnt by the authorities has often been burnt (see F18News 6 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=643) and religious literature censorship has recently been tightened (see F18News 29 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=805).

Forum 18 repeatedly tried to reach Urgench's Criminal Court by telephone, but on 10 separate occasions the phone was not answered.

Lunkin's home was raided in late April when the Christian material was seized, and three Turkmen citizens present were deported (see F18News 5 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=774). (END)

For a personal commentary by a Muslim scholar, advocating religious freedom for all faiths as the best antidote to Islamic religious extremism in Uzbekistan, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=338.

For more background, see Forum 18's Uzbekistan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=777.

For an analysis of whether the May 2005 Andijan events changed state religious policy in the year following, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=778. For an outline of what is known about Akramia itself, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=586, and for a May 2005 analysis of what happened in Andijan see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=567.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806, and of religious intolerance in Central Asia is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=815.

A printer-friendly map of Uzbekistan is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=uzbeki>.

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